INTRODUCTION

By NANCY LENKEITH

THE Fabula de homine was written by the Spanish Humanist Ludovicus Vives (1492–1540) shortly after he first met Erasmus in Louvain in 1518, while traveling in Flanders as tutor to the young cardinal, William of Croy. It is dedicated to his disciple, Antoine de Berges, a young Belgian nobleman of considerable erudition.1 This essay on man reveals the author’s devotion to the study of Cicero, his knowledge of contemporary philosophical thought, and his taste for literary refinement. Vives’ praise of man’s work on earth inevitably recalls similar utterances in Cicero’s De legibus (i. 8–9) and De natura deorum (ii. 56. 60–61), adding overtones of classical eloquence to his own account of the mystery of human greatness. The story is directly based on Pico’s conception of the dignity of man as sharing with God alone the power to be all things. As in Pico’s Oration, body and soul are treated as equal parts of the human essence, which is universal because it is undetermined. Vives’ version, in its mythological setting, is less precise than Pico’s: man is the son of Jupiter, born to play upon a stage at his will. The idea of the theater as a symbol and simile of the human life had been developed by the Stoics (Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus) and by the Neo-Platonists (Plotinus Ennead iii. 2). This allegorical framework, however, does not fully account for the personal character of Vives’ conception. There is also a biblical influence. The creation in time of the stage suggests Genesis, while the co-essentiality of Jupiter and his son reminds one of the dogma of the Incarnation.

1. For biographical information consult A. Bonilla y San Martin, Luis Vives y la filosofia del Rinacimiento (Madrid, 1903).
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Jupiter specifically determines the creation of the world as a stage, but he does not prescribe any particular form for man the actor. To him alone he gratuitously gives an unlimited power of self-transformation, exempting his nature from the rule of the immutability of essences. Man's activity determines his being. As his substance comprises the substances of other natures, he has power over the material world and the animals, moral power over himself, political power over those with whom he chooses to become associated, as a member of a family, of a state, and of humanity. This regnum hominis is not, as in Bacon, conquered by man through his scientific knowledge but received from Jupiter as a free gift. The ability to become another is the highest sign of divinity which could be bestowed upon man, given the previous existence of an outer world and sky. His Protean activity reaches its climax as he transforms himself into the person of the god Jupiter, thereby earning as a reward the immortality of his body and soul.

This fable written by a friend of Erasmus to expound a conception of the dignity of man borrowed from the Italian Humanists may well illustrate the interdependence of the cultural movements of the Renaissance.

A FABLE ABOUT MAN

I SHOULD like to begin this essay of mine on man by some fables and plays, since man is himself a fable and a play. Once upon a time, after a certain lavish and sumptuous feast given by Juno on her birthday for all the gods, they, feeling carefree and elated by the nectar, asked whether she had prepared some plays which they might watch after the banquet. Thus nothing would be lacking to complete their happiness on this august occasion.

To gratify this wish of the immortal gods, Juno earnestly asked her brother and husband Jupiter, since he was all-powerful, to improvise an amphitheater and to bring forth new characters, after the manner of regular plays, lest in this respect a day which she wanted most distinguished seem deficient to the gods. Thereupon, all of a sudden, at a command of almighty Jupiter, by whom alone all things are done, this whole world appeared, so large, so elaborate, so diversified, and beautiful in places, just as you see it. This was the amphitheater: uppermost, to wit in the skies, were the stalls and seats of the divine spectators, nethermost—some say in the middle—the earth was placed as a stage for the appearance of the actors, along with all the animals and everything else.

When everything was ready and the banquet tables carried away, Mercurius Braubeta announced that the players were already on the stage. Joyfully the spectators went forth and were seated, each according to his rank. The great Jupiter was director of the plays, and when he saw that all were there, he gave the signal. Since he was the maker, he ordered everything and ex-

1. [Ioannis Ludovici Vivis Valentini, Opera omnia (Valentiae, 1781), IV, 3-8.]
2. [Read qui (Jupiter) omnia cum faceret for quod (signum) omnia cum faceret. When translated quod cum omnia faceret (concessive), omnia is a pleonasm.]
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memory, sharing so many of his talents that it was easy to know that these great gifts had been bestowed upon him by Jupiter from out of his treasury and even from his own person.

Then, as he of gods the greatest, embracing all things in his might, is all things, they saw man, Jupiter's mime, be all things also. He would change himself so as to appear under the mask of a plant, acting a simple life without any power of sensation. Soon after, he withdrew and returned on the stage as a moral satirist, brought into the shapes of a thousand wild beasts: namely, the angry and raging lion, the rapacious and devouring wolf, the fierce and wild boar, the cunning little fox, the lustful and filthy sow, the timid hare, the envious dog, the stupid donkey. After doing this, he was out of sight for a short time; then the curtain was drawn back and he returned a man, prudent, just, faithful, human, kindly, and friendly, who went about the cities with the others, held the authority and obeyed in turn, cared for the public interest and welfare, and was finally in every way a political and social being.

The gods were not expecting to see him in more shapes when behold, he was remade into one of their own race, surpassing the nature of man and relying entirely upon a very wise mind. O great Jupiter, what a spectacle for them! At first they were astonished that they, too, should be brought to the stage and impersonated by such a convincing mime, whom they said to be that multiform Proteus, the son of the Ocean. Thereupon there was an unbelievable outburst of applause, and they prevented that great player from acting any longer. They begged Juno to let him into the stalls of the gods, unmasked, and to make of him a spectator rather than an actor. She was already eagerly going about obtaining this of her husband, when, at that very moment, man came out upholding the great Jupiter, the worthiest of gods,

3. [Omnia is omitted in printed text.]
4. [The Ethologi and Ethopaei were mimes impersonating moral traits. In the classical tradition the passions of men were symbolically represented by certain animals (cf. Cicero De oratore ii. 59-60).]
and with marvelous and indescribable gestures impersonating his father. He had transcended the characters of the lower gods and was piercing into that inaccessible light surrounded by darkness where Jupiter dwells, of kings and gods the king.

When the gods first saw him, they were roused and upset at the thought that their master and father had stooped to the stage. Soon, however, with composed minds, they glanced repeatedly at Jupiter's stall wondering whether he himself was sitting there or whether he had appeared masked to play a part. Seeing him there, they gazed back again at man and then at Jupiter. With such skill and propriety did he play Jupiter's part that, up and down, from Jupiter's stall to the stage, they kept glancing, lest they be misled by a likeness or the accurate mimic of an actor. Among the other players there were some who swore that this was not man but Jupiter himself, and they underwent severe punishment for their error.

Yet the gods, out of respect for this image of the father of all gods, and by their own suffrage, unanimously decreed that divine honors be granted to man. They prevailed upon Jupiter, through Juno's intercession, that man, who had so rightly played the parts of Jupiter and the gods, put off his mask and be seated among the gods. Jupiter complied with the gods, granting them what he himself, long before, had decided to bestow gratuitously upon man. Thus man was recalled from the stage, seated by Mercury among the gods, and proclaimed victor. There were no cheers to greet him but a silence of wonder. The whole man lay bare, showing the immortal gods his nature akin to theirs, this nature which, covered with mask and body, had made of him an animal so diverse, so desultory, so changing like a polypus and a chameleon, as they had seen him on the stage. Jupiter was then declared and proclaimed the father not only of the gods but also of men. With a gentle and mild countenance, he took delight in both, and was hailed and adored as a parent by both. With pleasure he received this august double name; and now, using also this favored title, we proclaim him of gods and men the father.

Now, when Mercury first came into the stalls of the gods, carrying in his arms the stage costumes, the gods looked at them with great interest; having examined them attentively, a long while, they praised Jupiter's wisdom and skill and adored him, for the costumes which he had made were no less appropriate than useful for all the acts. There was the lofty head, strong and court of the divine mind; in it the five senses arranged and placed ornately and usefully. The ears, accordingly, did not droop with soft skin, nor were they firmly fixed with a hard bone, but both were rounded by a sinuous cartilage. Thus they could receive sounds from all directions, and the dust, straw, fluff, gnats which might be flying around would not penetrate into the head but be caught in the folds. The eyes in equal number, two indeed, were high up so that they could observe all things and protected by a fine wall of lashes and eyelids against the same bits of straw and fluff, dust and tiny insects. They were the gauge of the soul and the noblest part of the human face. Then came the very attire of the mask or the mask itself, so handsomely shaped, divided into arms and legs which were long and ending with fingers, so good-looking and useful for all purposes. As there is no time to go through all that which others have related at great length, I shall add this conclusion. All is so well fitted and interrelated that if one were to withdraw or change or add something, all that harmony and beauty and the whole efficacy would be immediately lost. By no ingenuity could a more appropriate mask be conceived for a man, unless someone perhaps wish for the impossible.

When the gods saw man and embraced their brother, they deemed it unworthy of him to appear on a stage and practice the disreputable art of the theater, and they could not find enough praise for their own likeness and that of their father. They investigated one by one and examined the many hidden secrets of man and derived more pleasure from this than from the spectacle of all the plays, "Nor having seen him once are they content;
they wish to linger on." There indeed was a mind full of wisdom, prudence, knowledge, reason, so fertile that by itself it brought forth extraordinary things. Its inventions are: towns and houses, the use of herbs, stones and metals, the designations and names of all things, which foremost among his other inventions have especially caused wise men to wonder. Next and no less important, with a few letters he was able to comprise the immense variety of the sounds of the human voice. With these letters so many doctrines were fixed in writing and transmitted, including religion itself and the knowledge and cult of Jupiter the father and of the other brother-gods. This one thing, which is found in no other animal but man, shows his relationship to the gods. Of little good would all these inventions have been if there had not been added, as the treasury of all things and for the safe-keeping of these divine riches, a memory, the storehouse of all that we have enumerated. From religion and memory, foreknowledge is almost obtained, with the prophecy of the future, evidently a spark of that divine and immense science which perceives all future events as if they were present.

The gods were gazing at these and other things, as yet stateless; just as those who contemplate their beautiful reflection in a mirror take delight in these things and willingly tarry on, so the gods, seeing themselves and Jupiter their father so well portrayed in man, wished to look more and more at what they had already beheld, inquiring about one thing after another. How did he act plants, herbs, even wild animals, man, gods, the god king Jupiter, by what craft and gesture?

While man explained all this calmly and clearly, Jupiter ordered that ambrosia and nectar from the remains of the feast be placed before him. Cheerfully neglecting the plays, many of the gods had their afternoon refreshment with him. They were charmed by their brotherly guest or fellow-citizen, who, refreshed by heavenly victuals after the toil of the plays, wrapped like the other gods in the purple praetexta and bearing the crown,

went forth to watch the spectacle. Many of the gods stood up for him, many gave up their seats. In different directions they pulled his cloak and retarded his progress that he might stay next to them, until the great Jupiter nodded to Mercury, who led him, that he was to be received in the orchestra among the gods of the first rank, who considered this a great honor. Far was it from those gods of the highest order to despise man, who had been an actor a short time before. He was received by them with respect and invited to the front seats. He sat in their company and watched the games which proceeded without interruption, until Apollo himself reduced the light at Juno's request (for the masters of the feast and other servants, warned by the cooks, announced that supper was more than ready), and night fell upon them. Chandeliers, torches, wax tapers, candlesticks, and oil lamps brought by the stars were lighted, and they were entertained at supper with the same pomp as they had been at dinner. Juno also invited man, and Jupiter the father "assented and with a nod made all Olympus tremble."

Man, just as he had watched the plays with the highest gods, now reclined with them at the banquet. He put on his mask, which he had meanwhile laid aside, for this stage costume was so greatly honored. Since it had so well met the needs of man, it was deemed worthy of the most sumptuous feast and of the table of the gods. Thus it was given the power of perception and enjoyed the eternal bliss of the banquet.

6. [Ibid. ix. 106.]

5. [Virgil Aeneid vi. 487.]

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